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Are You Geographically Informed?

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OPINIONS

Are you geographically informed?

With all the hoopla today about kids not knowing their geography, the question could also be raised about today's businessperson and his knowledge of the world. After all, aren't the buzzwords now the global economy and knowing your place in it?

What we're talking about here is not only where places are located but also knowing something about the culture, the economy, the landscape, the climate and all of those things that contribute to a working knowledge of a place and its people. And isn't that the expectation of a businessperson who operates in foreign markets?

Although such information takes time and research to gain the full knowledge of a place, a simple way to start is knowing how to get from one place to another. In other words, a map of the world provides this opportunity. But be warned, maps can fool you.

Geographers speak of "mental maps", i.e., the picture of the world or a place that you carry around in your head. For example, when you say world, what comes to mind? A map centered on the Americas, with north at the top; or, more commonly, a map centered on the prime meridian with Africa in the center, also with north at the top.

The former map is fine if your market is someone in the Americas but it splits the eastern and western hemispheres, by contrast, the advantage of the latter is that it

shows all of the eastern 180 degrees in one segment, and the same is true for the western 180 degrees of the world. In other words, all of east longitude is shown to the international date line on the right hand half of the map and all of west longitude to the international date line is shown to the left.

As a result of commonly seeing such maps, we usually say "up north" and "down south," yet we don't say "right east" and "left west." This is why we should not use up and down to describe directions that parallel the earth surface, not go up or down from it.

Neither does north have to be at the top of a map, in fact, at the time of the Crusades, east was usually shown at the top of the map because the Middle East was their destination. Today, we still speak of orienting ourselves, i.e., to place ourselves in our setting, when literally, it meant to face east and the top of the map.

But maps lie, and the larger the area shown, the greater is the distortion. An older world map used in schools commonly was the Mercator, first drawn in 1569 and still in use for navigational purposes, which showed a Greenland larger than South America. In

fact, South America is nine times larger than Greenland.

With that mental map of the world still in your head, why do you stop in Alaska rather than Hawaii when flying from New York to Hong Kong. And why do you see

Greenland and Labrador below you on a flight from Boston to London rather than just the Atlantic.

With your flat world map in mind, both of these actual routes, although shorter, appear longer because maps also distort distance and direction.

It is impossible to show the round world on a flat map without some distortion in area, shape, distance or direction. The only true picture of the earth in which none of these properties are distorted is the globe. Yet I have yet to see a globe in the many classrooms that I visit, and this is why our National Geographic beachball inflatable globe that we give to teachers in our Rhode Island Geography Education program is so popular.

Looking at the globe readily shows the size difference between Greenland and South America, and with a piece of string

which goes around the earth and bisects it (called a Great Circle), any two places can be connected. The arc of that Great Circle is the shortest distance and true direction between those two places, including New York and Hong Kong and Boston and London.

Globes aren't perfect either. They are bulky, can be expensive and you can only see onehalf of the earth, no matter how you hold it. So this is why we have maps and atlases because they give us so much more information, at less cost, but with inaccuracies built in, of which many users are not aware.

For those who would like to know more about map errors, the reader should get a copy of Mark Monmonier's popular *How To Lie With Maps*. Local developers would find the chapter entitled "Development Maps (Or, How To Seduce The Town Board)" of interest.

Whether preparing a local development map or shipping products to Romania, a simple globe, a visible world map and an atlas will help prepare the businessperson for the new global economy. These tools will also help acquire a more accurate mental map.

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Commentary

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